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AUTHOR Arbur, Rosemarie
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ABSTRACT

Too frequently, the student/teacher writing conference is an undifferentiated and unplanned experience. Consideration of the interview process in the field of social work can substantially improve the quality of student/teacher conferences. Basically, seven elements are requisite to any integrated conference: engagement, problem exploration, problem identification, agreement to work on the problem together, task assignment, solution, and termination. (KS)

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Rosemarie Arbur
Dept of English
Lehigh University
Bethlehem Pa 18015

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THE STUDENT-TEACHER CONFERENCE

Rosemarie Arbur

[Prologue]

Except what I do in the classroom, the student-teacher conference is my most important pedagogical activity. Yet too often the conference is an undifferentiated experience. It's just a pleasant conversation that happens when a student walks through the doorway of my office. Or it's a fairly earnest conversation about some personal concern of a student who thinks me worthy of his trust. Or a functional conversation about which courses she needs to take or which electives she'd probably enjoy. Or, even, it's an invigorating discussion, prompted by something the student has read, about a matter we never got to in class. Or--here's the conference that most needs to be differentiated from the others--it's a student- or teacher-initiated meeting whose purpose is to resolve a problem that has arisen because of our student-teacher relationship.

In the classroom this relationship is defined quite tidily: by time, space, and tradition. My preparation for teaching has largely--overwhelming--been preparation to assume the classroom role of instructor. Instructor-of-

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individual-students, yes, but instructor of a class of individual students. So when Mike comes to see me after I put a D on his last paper, or when Jeanne comes to see me after I told her to, how do I know what to do? I can rely on instinct, on social convention, on past trial-and-error, and hope that this conference "works." But, because the student-teacher conference is an important part of my Actually Teaching, I should have something more substantial than hope to rely on.

Thinking recently about how I could make my conferences with students more effective, how I could inform "the conference" with the same sort of order and productivity that I strive for in each of my classes, I found myself posing this question: "What is the process of the student-teacher conference?" Because it is a good question I avoided it by framing two other, easier ones: "Why do I invite a student to confer with me?" and "Why does a student initiate a conference?"

These two preliminary questions are fairly easy. Nevertheless, answers to them are important because the answers identify specific issues to which conferences should be responsive. Hence, my answers about my motivations (and, where analogous, about students' motivations):

(a) Recurring errors in a student's writing that are not being eliminated or improved upon (recurring low grades and the desire to so something about them).

(b) Good things about a student's papers or examination answers or class discussion that I want to emphasize

and use as a base for the student's further learning. This is a noble reason insofar as "positive reinforcement" needs to be dispensed more frequently; its ulterior aspect--justifiable nevertheless--is its possible efficacy in recruiting "good students" into other English courses.[1]

(c) The completely messed-up paper or examination, or one with wild confusions that are too detailed to explain in marginal comments (an F or D that elicits "Where did I mess up?" or "How do I begin to fix this?")

(d) Simply the desire to go over a paper or examination answer with its author, so the student can see how I read student writing, how I would improve it, how I would reorganize this or that (general dissatisfaction with C's and the desire to find out how, specifically, to write better papers and exams).

(e) An apparent problem with a student's attitude or motivation.

(f) A "disciplinary" problem: to preserve civility in the classroom before classes become 50-minute ordeals.

Each of these motivations will define the process of the conference differently. The last two may alter the process radically, so I mention them separately later on. But all lead back to "What is the process of the student-teacher conference?"

The answer, in general, is "helping the student." But

the answer is not quite that simple. If it were, we teachers would not feel somewhat uneasy about the effect of conferences--we would not ask ourselves or, more tellingly, avoid asking ourselves at the end of a conference "Did I accomplish anything, really?" Still, the conference-process is simple once we realize that simplicity can be attained by integrating a number of partial processes and elements. Integrating does not mean relying, partly by instinct and partly by insecurity, on the informality of a person-to-person meeting and hoping that informality will obscure the rough edges. Nor does it mean following some meaningless ritual as a way of imposing form on an experience instead of allowing form to grow from or to help define the experience. Integrating means first becoming aware of the dynamics of meeting-in-my-office and then "going with" the dynamics so that they are operative and effective.

What we call the student-teacher conference, social workers call the interview. For them, in-the-office meeting with another person, one-to-one, is their primary professional activity; it is analogous to our meeting our students in the classroom. Because the interview (conference) is vitally important to their kind of "helping," social workers have analyzed the process the better to realize their goals. Because the problems they seek to alleviate by means of interviews are usually of far greater human importance than an F on a paper or a D on an exam, social workers' analysis is

more than haphazardly refined. We English teachers can fruitfully apply the results of their analysis to achieve more consistently and effectively the pedagogical purposes that are our special business.[2]

[Process]

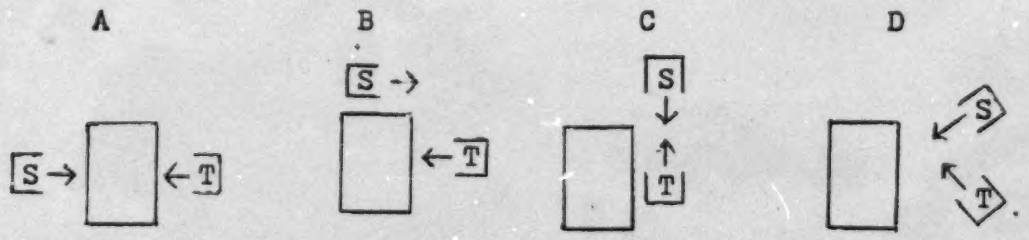
The process of the interview (for us, the student-teacher conference) has seven elements: engagement, problem exploration, problem identification, agreement to work on the problem together, task assignment, solution, and termination. In the specific contexts of course-related problems that are complex, the entire process may extend through several conferences. Yet even when we are confronting a student's fairly simple problem, we need to make use of the entire process (much abbreviated) for best effect. That is to say, these seven elements are requisite to any integrated--and thus, made-simple--conference.

Engagement: to begin in an atmosphere of courtesy, to put the student at ease, to identify one's purpose and expertise, to convey one's acceptance of the student, and, when appropriate, to establish some commitment to confidentiality.

The conference begins when the student appears at the office door or, if the teacher has initiated it, when the student is asked to "stop by my office." In this latter case, an ominous "I want to see you. Come by my office 10:30 on Tuesday" is counterproductive. Much better is something like

"Jeff, I've noticed that your papers so far have a lot of errors in diction; they'd be considerably better if you worked on a couple of specific things. Could you make it to my office 10:30 Tuesday? We could talk about two things that would especially improve your writing." From these examples, it becomes obvious that one aspect of engagement is amiability of the sort that dispels the image of teacher as Draconian judge.

Related to verbal courtesy are two matters of non-verbal communication: furniture and phone. A large desk, whether paper-strewn or barren, interposed between student and teacher is a formidable barrier. It reinstates the unfortunate aspect of "distance" that is typical of the classroom-with-lectern and contradicts the ideal of personal relation that the conference, by its nature, should embody. And, as (A) is "bad," so are (B) and (C): (B) because the conferees talk past each other, (C) because they are forced into eyeball-to-eyeball contact with little hope of escape.



(D), in one form or another, offers the best physical arrangement because both persons are able to look at the student's work simultaneously, and because their face-to-face

confrontations are voluntary and intermittent. Then there is the phone. Unless a telephone call is really important, it is secondary to the conference in progress. Our callers, knowing that we are teachers, should understand why we'd prefer to call back later instead of forcing students to eavesdrop unwillingly and uncomfortably. In the rare event of an expected phone call, it is courteous to advise the student of a possible interruption. Such physical matters may seem incidental, but they do affect the process of a conference.

Identifying one's expertise is neither so egotistical nor so obvious as it appears. By saying "diction" (not merely "problems") and "two things" (not "if you would work at your writing"), the teacher indicates her or his grasp of the matter at hand. To the student, these are indications that the "bad papers" are not hopeless and that the teacher can and will suggest ways to make them better.

Conveying acceptance of the student, no matter what the reason for the conference, is utterly important. To be sure, this acceptance is not unconditional (the attitude of the saintly or the foolish), but it is acceptance of the student, the person, distinct from her or his behavior. Especially in the context of English courses, students tend not to make the vital distinction between themselves and their written productions. Their papers and examination answers, they feel, are <u>expressions</u> of themselves, and the

teacher who writes F or D on a paper is likely thought of as having stamped "inferior"/"dumb"/"worthless" upon a sensitive soul. As the expert in matters of language and literature, the teacher must--often explicitly--remind the student that the problem is performance, behavior, product, rather than ultimate competence or self. It is the paper that is unacceptable, the words and phrases that are ineffective, not the student's personality.

In most cases a commitment to confidentiality may be implicit. It happens when a teacher realizes and indirectly communicates the awareness that nobody likes to have her or his shortcomings publicized, and that almost everybody is egocentric enough to assume that her or his behavior is worthy of widespread notice. When the conference addresses a student's problem with attitude or discipline, however, an explicit commitment is appropriate and necessary. To tell the student that the present discussion will remain confidential is to reveal the teacher's respect for the student and also the teacher's "professionalism."

Problem exploration: to get the student to consider whether or not his writing has (or is) a "problem," to get the student to identify the problem.

Begun during the engagement (with the mention of poor grades or diction, for example), exploration is simply guiding the student in his assessment of his writing so that the process of the conference answers the student's felt need. Unless this

exploration is pursued, the conference becomes a lecture: one person pontificating, the other neither hearing nor caring what is said.

While exploration primarily elicits the student's commitment to the learning process, it does require the guidance of the teacher. To the discouraged or insecure student "everything" about the paper is "wrong" and all things are equally "bad." The teacher knows better; thus the teacher's responsibility is to lead the student to identify the most serious problems in his writing. This leadership has two styles: the non-directive/"Socratic," and the directive/straightforward. The choice is the teacher's; the variables are the teacher's personality, the student's attitude and ability to analyze his own writing, and, probably, the pressure of time.

Problem identification: to isolate, as specifically as possible, the most serious problem.

Developing naturally from exploration, identification leads both student and teacher to the functional purpose of the conference. It is necessary for the student to perceive what, precisely, is the matter with her writing. It is equally necessary for student and teacher to agree about the nature of the problem and to share a sense of confidence about the teacher's ability to help with its solution.

In most conferences--except those few that happily deal with several actually minor lapses in style--it is psychologically necessary to limit identification to the

most pressing cause (perhaps two causes) of the weaknesses in the student's writing. Partly out of sincerity but partly out of a natural desire to avoid the logical consequence (working on the problem), the student is likely to broaden the context of identification: "But what about -----?" The teacher's responsibility is to answer by putting these other matters in perspective, to resist the temptation to talk about them, and to re-focus the conference process on the problem being identified. Only then can both student and teacher move on toward solutions.

Agreement to work on the problem together: self-evident.

The challenge of this part of the process is twofold. First, the student not only has to agree about what the problem is but has to agree to do something (with the help of the teacher). Merely "talking it over" is not enough. Second, the teacher has to feel bound to limit her or his efficacy to the problem identified. Beware of "hidden agenda": the conference is about the student's writing, not about the student's position, possibly different from the teacher's, on a controversial topic. The conference is a context for helping the student; it is not an opportunity for the teacher to wax pedantic or authoritative in some eloquent exposition of the teacher's pet ideas. In brief, agreement is the student's, to do something; and is the teacher's, to facilitate that (and only that) doing. If necessary, the terms of this agreement can be renegotiated--but at a later time: matter

for another conference.

Task assignment: to articulate clearly what the student must do.

Although the teacher's expertise gives her or him the weightier voice in the assignment, the student must participate in it, too. The student should collect data (how many shifts in person in the last two themes?) and interpret the data (fewer of these errors in the second than in the first paper?) or else the student will be bound always to the judgment of another for the improvement--even the assessment--of her own writing.

Besides checking the student's accuracy in data collection and interpretation, the teacher must emphasize the priorities determined by the identification. If the student's most frequent errors are pronouns without antecedents, the teacher must make sure the assigned task has to do with the reference of pronouns.

Depending on the student/problem, the fulfillment of the assignment gets done during the conference, or as a take-home exercise, or both. Satisfactory fulfillment leads to the next part of the conference.

Solution: when, by mutual recognition, the problem is eliminated or eliminated to the extent that it satisfies the realistic expectations of both student and teacher.

It is almost always necessary, from a pedagogical/practical and a psychological point of view, to include the

solution--or an attempt at it--in the conference. If the student does in fact correct several sentences with ambiguous pronouns during the conference, the teacher knows that the student has identified the problem and has to some extent progressed toward the solution; and the student has a tangible experience upon which to base some realistic expectation of future improvement. Tackling specific examples of the problem in the teacher's office gives the student an important sense of accomplishment.

To enhance this feeling, to make it operative outside the teacher's office, and to insure that the student will in fact be working toward a solution, the teacher and student should in most situations agree further on some sort of take-home exercise. Psychologically, the performance (or lack of performance) of the exercise indicates to the teacher the seriousness of the student's intention to improve. Similarly, for the student such a take-home exercise is a specific context in which to work for the desired goal. The exercise extends the process of the conference; by its demands on both student's (doing it) and teacher's (reviewing it) time, it also emphasizes the importance of the process.

Ultimate "solutions" are probably attained seldom if at all. In the context of a student-teacher conference, however, solution is relative. In the case of a "mixed-up" paper, the solution may be simply the student's recognition that he failed to develop the statements he set forth

emphatically in his first paragraph; that his essay really requires another paragraph which just as emphatically identifies the ideas that he actually did develop. In the case of the problem with pronoun reference, the solution may be the student's recognition (and evidence therefor) that "this" may not properly refer to some "idea" hovering above the preceding six lines of writing. Or the solution may be more behavioral and more relative: if, in the next written class assignment, pronoun-problems exist but no longer abound, both student and teacher may conclude that some solution has been attained.

Reaching a solution means that the process of the conference is nearly completed. It may also mean that another process--renegotiating identification and task assignment--should be initiated. If the latter, another conference is in order, to deal with other of the student's course-related problems. Before beginning another identification, however, give the present conference a real conclusion; both student and teacher deserve to feel a sense of accomplishment.

Termination: "endings are important" translated into word and deed.

A solution having been reached, the student especially needs to be aware of it. Most simply, termination is engagement in reverse; the promises of engagement, however, have been fulfilled by the experience of the conference. Termina-

tion ought to include some expression of the teacher's confidence in the student's ability (native or developed during the conference) to tackle the identified problem with good probability of success. Thus termination: an integrated process completed, some specific goal(s) outlined or achieved, and the student-teacher relation strengthened.
[Footnote]

As I suggested before, conferences that address a student's apparent difficulty with attitude or motivation and those that are prompted by a teacher's concern about a student's disruptive classroom behavior are special cases. These conferences require a somewhat different process, especially in the ways that problems are identified and solutions achieved. Very few English teachers are thoroughly competent clinical psychologists, nor is psychological counseling ("helping the dysfunctional person" as opposed to "helping the student as student") part of our teaching duties. Unless the "problem" turns out to be a misunderstanding that gets resolved without much ado, the conference ought to produce a referral to the school's student counseling service. And the referral need not be a traumatizing "Wow, do you need help!" for two matter-of-fact reasons.

First, a college or university includes many departments; "English" and the "Counseling Center" are in this respect equivalent. By advising a troubled student to confer with another professional member of the faculty, the English

teacher is not making a value judgment about the student. Instead, the English teacher is identifying the limits of her or his expertise--is suggesting only that the student's problem lies beyond the teacher's range of professional competence. This departmental equivalency, minus value judgments, needs a lot more emphasis than I can give it here.

Second, the "Counseling Center" is not a place only for freaked-out weirdos. In most schools, the major counseling emphasis is educational-vocational, not psychological. Thus, "to see a counselor" may be any number of things, and nobody knows what sort of counseling goes on behind the counselor's office door. If the teacher withholds all premature diagnoses--as she or he responsibly must--the teacher is suggesting only that the student explore with a better qualified person the causes of the student's apparent problem. It may be that the student does not want to be in college and would find a vocationally-oriented kind of schooling more germane; it may be that the student's problem is medical or nutritional. The MMPI and SCII[3] look the same to persons passing the testing room; and people who pass the testing room are at the Counseling Center for good reasons of their own.

[Epilogue]

An integrated student-teacher conference may take fewer minutes than reading this does. Each of the components of the conference process blends into the others and receives

the emphasis required by each individual student and teacher. The value of perceiving the conference as a coherent process is obvious: the perception influences the experience.

Lehigh University

NOTES

[1] In the analysis that follows, these "good things" are not explicitly dealt with. Although a somewhat less formal conference usually suffices for the positive reinforcement these good things deserve, they may profitably be treated as happy analogues of the "problems" that are discussed.

[2] For my identification of the seven elements and their theoretical ramifications I am indebted to my husband, Steven Maier. His "special business" is family counseling and the education of future social workers.

[3] The Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory and the Strong-Campbell Interest Inventory, the first a true "psychological test" and the second merely a systematic way to measure a person's interests.